

Reading: Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

A bartender notices that every evening, without fail, one of his patrons orders three beers. After several weeks of noticing this pattern, the bartender asks the man why he always orders three beers. The man says, "I have two brothers who have moved away to different countries. We promised each other that we would always order an extra two beers whenever we drank as a way of keeping up the family bond."

Several weeks later, noticing that the man only ordered two beers, the bartender says, "Please accept my condolences on the death of one of your brothers. You know, the two beers and all..." The man replies, "You'll be happy to hear that my two brothers are alive and well. It's just that I, myself, have decided to give up drinking for Lent."

Today, Ash Wednesday, is the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent began in the early church with a season of preparation for baptism. Easter was the time for all the baptisms and those getting ready for baptism would enter the catechumenate. So helpful was this period of preparation for baptism that it wasn't long until the whole church; all the people, began joining in this season and following the example of Jesus in the desert (who prepared for his baptism with 40 days of fasting.) Lent is a time when we are more intentional in our prayers, we fast, and we are generous with our time and money.

But why bother? Well, the gospel gives us the clue we need. Jesus uses the word three times in our short gospel reading, the word is 'hypocrites'. Verse 2: "So whenever you give money do not sound a trumpet like the hypocrites do." Verse 5: "And whenever you pray do be like the hypocrites" and verse 16: "When you fast don't be like the hypocrites."

The first hearers of this Gospel would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about. Our word hypocrite comes from the Greek word for actor – a person who puts on a mask to become something they are not. In some theatres, even today, the stage will have a happy and sad mask face above the curtain, as a symbol of acting. What Jesus is saying in our reading is that who we say we are, and who we are needs to line up.

As Christians, followers of Christ, we are to live lives of integrity where our claims and our words match our lives. How would we know if we were doing this? Well, if a stranger came and lived with you how long would it be before they noticed you are a Christian? Would they see you saying grace at meals? Would they see you praying at all? Would they see you forgiving others, or holding a grudge? Would they see you thanking God, or just using God as a swear word?

Every day at morning prayer we pray for persecuted Christians around the world. We have a prayer cycle which names a different group of people each day. Some of them have been taken to court for being Christians and there was enough evidence to convict them. If you were taken to court for being a Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict you?

Or have we all become so skilled at blending in and not causing offense that we act and live just like everyone else?

The reason for the fasting and the praying and the generous giving is not to feel miserable. Anyone can do that without the church's help. The reason for fasting, praying and generosity is to help us realize the hypocrisy in all our lives. The difference between the mask we project to the world and the real us.

Lent is a time of drawing ever closer to the source of God's love, Jesus Christ. It is a time to hold a mirror up to our lives and ask ourselves the difficult question: Am I living as Christ would have me? Or am I a hypocrite?